

[White Walls and Quiet]

Mari Tomasi Men Against Granite

[Recorded?]

Writers' Section [Files?]

AUG 20 1940

WHITE WALLS AND QUITE

The studio couch was pulled out and shades were drawn. A table lamp drew low shadows from the ceiling and from the walls; it dwarfed the room, made it cozy. The two nurses had abandoned their stiff white uniforms for flannel bathrobes and slippers. Allie, small, dark-haired and pretty, lay on the bed smoking. Mary sat by the lamp polishing her nails. A miniature ivory radio crooned: She was a picture in old Spanish lace, Just for a tender while I kissed the smile upon her face, For it was fiesta —

"You'd better lower it," Allie advised mechanically. "It's after nine. Mrs. Peterson'll have kittens for a week."

"Let her," Mary said, but she bent to the radio and turned the dial. "Ever since I went in training I've lived in the quiet of a tomb. Quiet signs all over the hospital. Even in the dining hall. Quiet signs in the dormitory. And now that I'm through, quiet every time I'm on a case. On top of that we have to go and get ourselves a room from a female that'd swoon if we let out one lusty yell. One of these days I'm going to get me a cabin in the woods for a week, and let myself yodel [back to normal.]"

[A still through the radio- There in a knelt to pray- to that Allie she propped a fat pillow behind her book, "Sounds he? Sounds thrilling?] 2 doesn't he? But you never can tell.

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When I was in Burlington, a crooner from an orchestra that was playing at the Lake was brought to the hospital. On the verge of d.t. He had about as much sex appeal as a dead mackerel. What a letdown that was! He just lay there in bed demanding attention every second, thinking we had to wait on him hand and foot. Believe me he did get his attention for a while. Every girl on the floor carried a puff and lipstick around in her uniform pocket. They all but had fistfights to see who could get in there to pamper the nit-wit. But just for a day. It didn't take them long to get fed up with those royal kidneys of his. That crooner had the worst disposition of any one I've ever come across."

"I'd rather have a male patient any day," Mary interjected. "A man's not as fussy as a woman."

"So would I, ordinarily," Allie agreed. "But one extra bad male is worse than ten females. Remember that old timer in the ward the year I graduated. He was an awful grouch. Swore and cursed all the time. Couldn't open his mouth without letting out a stream of scum. We all dreaded to take our turn with him. He knew he was going to die, and he was scared. This business of dying was on his mind all the time and it made him uglier than ever. He got so bad they decided to move him to a private room. The ward staff was tickled pink to get rid of him. The morning you heard he was going to be moved you walked in and said to him, 'Well, Mr. Brown I hear we're losing you soon.'

"All he could think of was dying. Remember he called you a hell-skirted-fool, and said he'd die when he was damn good and ready, and not before? Then he went into one of his awful 3 tantrums," Allie laughed. "To finish it off, Dr. Burton walked in a few minutes later and very innocently told the ward patients. 'It's going to be pretty dead around here with Brown gone, isn't it?' Mr. Brown all but exploded. He called Dr. Burton a murderer. It took poor Burton an hour to convince him that he was simply going to be moved to another room and that's all.

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"I was taking care of a cute Spanish kid around the same time, he was about four years old. The chubby, lovable kind. We were all crazy about him. His father'd died of stonecutter's t.b, a few months before. Little Jerry was diabetic. The night he came to us I had to get a specimen, so I brought him the urinal. He didn't want to use it. I coaxed and pleaded. He'd just lay there and shake his head.

"Look Jerry,' I begged. 'Be a good boy and use it. You don't want to wake up in the night, do you, and find your bed all wet and cold?'

"He said, "Not cold. I pee hot.'

"Mary here used to know Jerry's father. She lived next door to him in Graniteville. I always lived here in town except for part of my training that I received out of State. I guess Barre's just a habit with me. I can think of lots of other places I'd rather live in. I had three months in pediatrics in a children's hospital in Montreal. I happened to mention my hometown to an old doctor who was on the hospital staff. "Barre?' he said. 'Sure I know Barre. I was there once years ago. That's the grappa town. The stuff's strong enough to kill a mule. Do they still make it there?' I told him that a lot of them up here was getting beer-minded, but 4 there was still grappa for those that wanted it.

"I worked in the sanitarium up on the hill for a few months," Mary said. "It's a fine hospital, but the atmosphere's so depressing. A few got well. Darn few. Everything seems so futile, so hopeless. Not only the patients themselves, but the place itself. The atmosphere. I've seen visitors come up the hill smiling and chatting. The minute they open that door they're changed. It's as if they left their smiles in a package outside the door. I suppose it's the same feeling that makes you silent when you visit the dead. The visitors who came up there realize that most of the patients are doomed. If they'd only be cheerful it'd help a lot. Some t.b. patients don't fight for life. If the visitors came up with hopeful faces it might give them the initiative to fight the disease. I couldn't stand working in the sanitarium. The gloom followed me everywhere. I couldn't even enjoy myself evenings.

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"Of course, in this sanitarium most of the patients are men. Granite workers."

Allie leaned across the bed and crushed her cigarette in a tray. "When I was in high school I knew an entire family that was wiped out by t.b. A boy and a girl from that family went to school with me. The two of them and the father and mother all died within five years. The father was the first to get it. He was Scotch, a stonecutter. But he wasn't the first one to die in the family. His son went ten months before he did. I should think anyone with any brains would keep out of granite. But I guess they say the same about nursing."

Mary cut the radio to a whisper. "Oh, I suppose one job's as bad as another. Not to change the subject but that was some fire we had on Main Street Saturday. Those Syrians lost about \$150,000. The Gordon Block. Two or three Syrians owned it. Everything was destroyed - a Fishman store, beauty parlor, dental office, three lawyer's office. Ex-mayor Gordon had a fine law library there, one of the best in the State. The fire started in the Fishman store. It's funny, the Montpelier Fishman store had a fire only last week, didn't it? I heard they were investigating——"

Allie interrupted, "I'd made an appointment for a permanent at the beauty parlor directly over Fishman's—now that's out. I can't seem to get it done as I want it anywhere else. You get used to one person's work, but this time I just had to try out a new place. I'm going to the Firemen's ball Wednesday night. Thanksgiving eve. Tommy Reynolds is playing."

"Think he'll have as much appeal as your d.t. crooner?" Mary teased.

"Never can tell," Allie paused for a moment. "I've seen it happen more times. I mean, standing in awe of someone, or having a crush on him, and then some perfectly natural, homely thing happening that takes him off the pedestal and shows him to be just as human as yourself. Like [Fudge?]. Remember [Fudge?]? In training we were all scared to death of him. If it was my hard luck to be scheduled for the operating room with him I'd shiver all the way through the operation. He had a way of looking at you with his small,

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sharp, bright eyes. Made you feel as if you were under the microscope, and not one-third as important as what's usually under there. I'll never forget one 6 appendectomy. I was scheduled for unsterile attendant. [Fudge?] was about halfway through the operation when I noticed him squirming, and wriggling that roly-poly waist of his. Then all of a sudden his white pants eased over his hips and slipped to the floor. And [Fudge?] stood there with his legs swathed in long, gray underwear. He went right on operating, all he said was, 'Pick 'em up,?' and he shuffled his feet out of those pants with scarcely any movement. Everyone else in the room was sterile, so I stooped down and picked them up and draped them over a chair.

"I wasn't scared of him any more. I got so I actually liked the pompous little so-and-so. The rest of the doctors thought it was a big joke. Remember how they used to greet me as 'Kiss Pants.' Even [Fudge?] called me that."

"It isn't only the pants accident that makes you like him," Mary hinted.

"Well, I'm going to the ball with [Fudge's?] nephew," Allie retorted. "But that doesn't mean anything—or does it?"